



SHRUNKEN HEADS



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NO. 4 IN A SERIES OF

Lore Leaves

REPRINTED FROM *Lore*

VOL. 3, NO. 3

A MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM
PUBLICATION

Published by Order of the Board of Trustees

Daniel D. Teofil Jr.
Archival Collection



SHRUNKEN HEADS

by
ROBERT
RITZENTHALER

Acting Curator of Anthropology

HUMAN HEADS shrunk to the size of an orange!

These grim little objects have proved to be a major attraction in any museum. What is their appeal? Why do they so readily capture the fancy of the average person? Perhaps it is something akin to the force that attracts people to the scene of an accident. Perhaps it is sheer curiosity as to how a human head could be reduced to one-third normal size and still retain the facial features.

Certainly the appeal is not an aesthetic one for such miniature heads are not objects of beauty. They are distinctive for their disproportionately long, lank hair, the dye-darkened and polished skin, the crudely modeled facial features, the sealed eyes, the lips sewn shut with long strands of fiber—with loose ends hanging down, and the double perforation at the crown with a cord inserted for purposes of suspension.

Such are the war trophies of the Jivaro (hee'-va-ro) Indians of Eastern Ecuador. While the custom of taking heads as trophies is widely distributed around the world, the practice of shrinking such trophies is limited to a relatively small area in South America, including parts of Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, and Brazil. That this practice has

been going on for a long time is evidenced by the portrayal of such heads on the textiles and pottery of such prehistoric peoples as the Nazca, who flourished on the south coast of Peru from about 600 to 800 A.D. With the coming of the Spanish the practice was outlawed, but enforcement of the prohibition was difficult, particularly in the remote areas, and there is evidence that the custom continues to some extent today among such tribes as the Mundurucu and Jivaro.

Among the Jivaro, the purpose of taking and shrinking heads involves two concepts. The killing of an enemy and taking his head is done in the spirit of revenge by a member of a family in retaliation for a relative previously slain by the enemy. However, the severed head has no significance until shrunk, at which time it becomes instilled with a magical power which can bring both good and evil to the owner, depending upon how it is cared for. Both male and female heads were taken, but never the heads of slain children or one's own relatives. The shrunk head, called a "tsantsa" by the Jivaro, symbolizes disgrace to the enemy and pleases the ancestral spirits by its demonstration that the family has been avenged.

The Jivaro have the reputation of being one of the most warlike tribes of South America. While they have waged war on the white man and on neighboring tribes, most of their headhunting has been confined to their own group. The chief cause of war is the system of blood revenge in which endless, mutually destructive feuds go on. A member of one family who has lost a relative in a raid believes that his crops will be poor and his hunting unsuccessful, unless a head from the family of the slayer is taken. War is further stimulated by the great prestige accorded the warrior. From early childhood, the father teaches his sons the arts and importance of war. Small boys are taken along on war expeditions as part of their training.

War is practiced according to a traditional set of rules. Information on the enemy is obtained through spies and the village declares war in a ceremony, the main feature of which is the digging up of a special spear buried in the forest. During the ceremony a messenger is sent out to notify friendly villages and enlist recruits. After the ceremony another messenger is sent to the enemy village to warn them of the coming raid.

The warriors prepare for battle by painting their bodies black and putting on their finest ornaments. A night dance is held and the warriors, with guns and spears, depart so as to arrive at the enemy village at dawn. When they near the village and are discovered by the alerted defenders, taunts are exchanged and the attack begins. The warriors fight their way into the large communal house in which the whole village lives, and kill everyone they can, except some of the more attractive young women who are taken captive. When an opponent is killed, the warrior cuts off the head as soon as circum-



FROM NAZCA TEXTILE



stances permit. If the war party is victorious, the house is looted and burned and the warriors depart with their collection of several heads carried in baskets.

On the way back a temporary shelter is erected, usually along a sand bar on a river, and the process of shrinking the heads begins. On each head a slit is made up the back of the neck, and the skull is removed. The skin is scraped free of flesh, and the eyes and lips are sewn shut. It is then put into a pot containing a hot, astringent solution and cooked for several hours, which causes the head to shrink to about one-third of its original size. After cooling, the slit up the back of the neck is closed by sewing. Small, rounded stones and sand, which have been heating in the fire, are used to complete the shrinking process. One of the larger stones is taken from the fire and dropped through the neck opening into the head, which is held upside down in the hand. The stone is rotated in the head to cause drying and shrinkage. While this is being done, the warrior models the facial features with a small stone to retain their approximate shape and proportions. When the stone has cooled, it is replaced with another, smaller, heated stone.

After a few hours of this, hot sand is substituted for the stones. The head is filled halfway with the hot sand which penetrates into the smaller crevices not reached by the pebbles. After numerous applications of sand, the shrinkage is completed and the head is now about four inches in diameter. With native heads, the facial hair is singed off with a torch, but the eyebrows and eyelashes are left intact. A cord for suspension is run through two perforations in the crown and attached to a piece of wood on the interior, so it will not pull out. For purposes of coloration and preservation, the head is hung a few feet over a low, smoky fire over-night. The head and smoke hardens the skin and turns the color from yellowish to black. The head is then polished with a cloth to make it shine, and it is now ready for use.

If a warrior slays an enemy but does not have an opportunity to remove the head, he is permitted to make a substitute from a sloth's head, reduced in the same manner as the human.

In the morning a messenger is sent to the warriors' village informing the people of how many heads were taken. The women prepare to receive the war party by providing a bowl of fowl blood and a bowl of black paint for each head taken. As the returning warriors approach the village, each suspends his captured trophy head around his neck. Entering the house, each warrior thrusts the butt end of his spear into the ground and impales the shrunken head on the up-turned point. As they thus stand, the women enter with their bowls and apply spots of blood to the right leg, and spots of black paint to the left leg of each warrior. The warriors then adjourn to their individual beds and smear



more blood from the bowl on their chest and arms, declaring that this is the blood of those they have slain.

This is followed by a feast and victory dance in which the warriors, with their spears, encircle the shrunken heads re-enacting the killing of their victims. After the dance each head is wrapped in a cloth, put in a pottery jar, and either stored over the man's bed or buried under the house. For the next half year each warrior who has taken a head must observe certain food, sex, and hunting taboos.

The various tribes of Jivaro Indians occupy a huge area of some 25,000 square miles in the rugged foothills on the eastern slopes of the Andes mountains in Ecuador. The heavy rainfall in this region produces a thick, tropical jungle. The Jivaro numbered approximately 50,000 in the sixteenth century, but have substantially decreased since then due to disease and warfare. They are politically ununited, but share a common language, culture, and physical type.

The Jivaro live in large, elliptical houses, as much as 80 feet in length, with a door at one end for the men and another at the opposite end for women. The occupants consist of a family tracing descent in the male line and ruled over by an elder male. A half dozen or so such houses make up a settlement which serves as a unit for protection against raids or for purposes of aggressive warfare.

Clothing for the men consists of a cotton skirt, of native cloth, which hangs down to a few inches below the knee, while the women wear a cotton dress fastened over one shoulder and extending to just below the knee. They are very fond of ornaments, particularly the men, and practice both tattooing and face and body painting.

The food quest is based on hunting and fishing which are done by the men, and on agriculture carried on by the women. Manioc (tapioca) is the chief crop.

For a more complete picture of the culture and head-shrinking practices of this tribe, see M. W. Stirling's report: Historical and Ethnographical Material on the Jivaro Indians, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 117.

Because of the demand for these grisly objects, considerable faking of them has been done by the whites, not only in Ecuador, but in Peru and Panama as well. In most cases monkey or goat skin is used but there is one case of a faker who apparently used the unclaimed hospital dead. The fake specimen shown here was obtained in Panama and, judging from the hair, is the head of a negro.



[REDACTED]



M.P.M. FIGURE OF JIVARO WEARING SHRUNKEN HEAD



JIVARO INDIAN SHRUNKEN HEAD

[REDACTED]



NON-INDIAN



NON-INDIAN

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